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BRUNO MUNARI: DESIGN METHOD

PRESENTAZIONE *di Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani*

Bruno Munari, an undisputed master of Italian design, has never believed in the artistic idea as a base on which to build design, just as on the other hand he has never been able to imagine design without an artistic idea. His creative and didactic endeavour has always been poised between system and invention, surveying complex methodologies that would embrace common sense as well as fantasy.

Perhaps the best way of approaching the work and thought of Munari is to read his books. They express his cultural positions with deep clarity and sophisticated simplicity, and not only through the written part: a book by Munari is at once a treatise and a design project; instructions for use and at the same time an example put into practice in accordance with those instructions. Naturally, with the skilled hand of Munari himself to follow the self-imposed guidelines with relaxed imagination.

In publishing here the brief essay written for us by Munari and followed up by a few salient excerpts from his books, we invited him also to contribute to the graphic design. The result, we feel, reproduces in miniature one of his extraordinary little volumes. And we hope it offers an essential and meaningful synthesis of his way of designing.

The extracts published after the essay by Bruno Munari, taken from books often not easily found, have been chosen by Enrico Morteo.

BRUNO MUNARI, DESIGN METHOD

There is no precise, absolute and definitive method of doing better design, according to the principle of least effort, with which to attain the maximum results in the finished product. Nevertheless, large quantities of cookery books continue to be printed and sold, in which thousands of recipes are presented to the public so that everybody can design a good dish for themselves. And yet, every cookery book is a book of design methodology.

Since, moreover, design means planning a course of action and the planning of a new food can also be a subject of design, it transpires that, if not a precise, absolute and definitive method, at least a series of operations and an order of sequence to operate are necessary also to the designer. It is the still green designers who would like somebody to explain to them how to design with the least effort and the maximum result; whilst the mature designers, for some unknown reason, affirm that no method exists, that everyone can do as he pleases.

Then there is the artist, who believes it is enough to have an idea (usually of the artistic type) to be a designer, even if this kind of designer knows nothing about technologies and materials. And here we find numerous design products of this artistic type that are charming to look at, very expensive, rarely or not at all functional, and strange, that last only one season and are produced in very small numbers for an élite who are ignorant of real problems but want to show they are «in».

The opposite of this type of designer is the rigorous one with no imagination, who goes on doing the same objects all through his career. Such products may even sell well, because they don't break the rules, but in the end they leave no trace. Between these two extremes works the designer who has a method of his own. A provisional definition of what is meant by method might be: a succession of operations set out in an order dictated by experience in order to design in the right way, that is without wasting energy or money, for a product that will satisfactorily fulfil the purpose for which it is designed, that will also have a look of its own (and not of applied art kind), that will sell at the right price, be easy to use, and so on. So there exists a method, the outline of a method, made up of objective values to which every designer adds the subjective values he is accustomed to, in order to resolve a design problem.

It ought to be indisputable, however, that just as to make a risotto you can't put the rice into the saucepan without water, so also in the basic elements of design method certain values have to be

considered whatever type of design it happens to be. It must be considered, for example, that every objet to be designed has its optimal material which gives it its body, that every material has its right technology, that this technology gives certain forms and not others, that the aesthetic of that particular technology has to be discovered or invented, instead of thinking a priori about the «beautiful» objet or about the «new object at all costs». It is in this search for a technological aesthetic that creativity, not artistic fantasy, must be used. Fantasy has no limits and takes no account of how to realize the fantastic idea (technology can do everything, say the fanciful designers); whereas creativity demands a subtler inventiveness, since it that to be realized in the forms permitted by technology and materials. There must therefore be subtle harmonies of formal and material consistency, between the parts and the whole, as occurs in nature, where the grasshopper is different from the snail but both are consistent in their function and formal appearance.

No precise method, therefore, exists which is equal for all designers. Instead there exists a design structure with a logical basis. To this will be added all those subjective values necessary to attain a good product in which all components – material, technological, economic, functional and aesthetic – have been considered at the same level. Styling, on the other hand, is another sector of design, where the fashion aspect is predominant and goods are produced for rapid consumption: USA and jet.